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ABSTRACT

A discussion of factors that influence English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) learning by native speakers of Chinese focuses on three specific factors (cognitive style, individual differences, and native language interference), and offers classroom solutions. The effect of each of the three factors on ESL comprehension and production is considered, drawing on language patterns in both English and Chinese and on research in the area. Several approaches to addressing these factors in classroom practice are suggested. The first is stimulation of the learner's empathy for the native speaker, particularly by use of cultural information and instruction in contemporary language use. The second is to address learner attitudes, transforming reluctance into enthusiasm by selecting teaching materials and providing practice opportunities that improve learner self-confidence. The third approach is to provide learning strategies that reinforce the native English-speaker's language use patterns. (Contains 14 references.) (MSE)

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A Study of Factors That Influence Foreign Language Learning

& Some Possible Solutions

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A Study of Factors That Influence Foreign Language Learning & Some Possible Solutions

This paper seeks to explore the factors that influence foreign language learning from a cognitive, linguistic and cultural perspectives. Since comprehension of a target language plays an important role in learning the paper starts with the discussion of the influence of different thinking patterns on the understanding of a foreign language. Then it goes on to look at the influences of individual differences on understanding the target language, which include differences of memory capacity and mode, and analysis ability and mode etc. Thirdly the paper investigates the influence of first language on the understanding of the target language. Finally the paper intends to offer some possible solutions to the above mentioned factors, which probably include stimulation of the learner's empathy to identify himself with the native speakers, adjustment of the learner's attitudes towards foreign language learning and mastery of learner's strategies to tailor to different needs of the learners'.

I. Introduction

Two main problems confronting Chinese learners of English entail comprehension and production of the target language in the cause of interactive communications, which are also the major issues treated in Second Language Acquisition theory, since success in understanding and speaking the target language is the indication of the acquisition of the language. Comprehension and production of a second language are influenced by many factors including cognitive paradigm, linguistic competence as well as affective states. This paper concentrates on the following aspects: cognitive constructs, individual differences and interferences from the mother tongue in the process of learning and then seeks to provide solutions to the aforementioned factors which probably include stimulation of the learners' empathy to identify himself with the native speakers, adjustment of the learner's attitudes toward foreign language learning and mastery of learning strategies so as to tailor to the different needs of the learners'.

II. Cognitive style versus comprehension

Not only does language convey ideas or messages, but also it is an indication as to how people view this world, or in other words, how reality is represented in the mind of people. Chinese perception of the world in terms of space, time and part-whole relationship differentiates from that of English. With regard to space as demonstrated in the relationship between part and whole, Chinese has the propensity to place the "whole" before the "part". Compare the following sentences (Tai, 1990):

a. 1. wǔ gè jú zi wǒ chī le sān gè.
Five oranges I ate three.
2. wǒ bǎ wǔ gè jú zi chī le sān ge.
I five oranges ate three.
3. wǔ gè jú zi bèi wǒ chī le sān ge.
Five oranges were me eaten three.
b. I have eaten three of the five oranges.

The first three sentences in Chinese all impart the same meaning as indicated through the last English sentence "I have eaten three of the five oranges". However, Chinese always place the word signifying "whole" in front of the word signifying "part" no matter in what way they try to express it. The reason, according to Tai (1990) is perhaps that this way of expression can clarify if the deducted part is one object or a few objects. While English, on the other hand, state the "part" before the "whole". This reflects the distinctive thinking pattern of Chinese characterized by the sequence of description first and then the result.

Another obvious example is illustrated through the way of writing addresses. Chinese tend to follow the pattern of the name of country, city, district, street and finally the number while English counterpart is entirely the other way around, which begins from the specific number, then comes street, city etc.

Examples:

1. China, Beijing, Haidian District, Xueyuan Rd, No. 5
2. 3 East Read Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21202, U.S.A.

The distinction existed between Chinese viewpoint and English one makes it difficult for Chinese learners to get hold of the meaning that English conveyed, especially in a short period. The learner has to transfer between different languages before he comes to the real meaning.

Now let's turn our attention to the conception of time. The logical thinking of Chinese in terms of time is that what happens first should be described or stated first while the latter occurrences follow. The so-called temporal sequence principle is how Chinese organize sentences and make them a coherent whole. The reason is that Chinese, as an analytical language, depends more on word order and function words in arranging ideas rather than inflected forms. Compare the following sentences:

1. wǒ xiě wán zhè piān wén zhāng jiù qù yóu jú.
   When/After I finish this essay I will go to the post office.
*2. wǒ jiù qù you ju xiě wán zhè piān wén zhāng.
   I am going to the post office after I finish this essay.

The first sentence in Chinese is correct while the second one is not acceptable. But both first and second sentence in English are perfectly correct. Therefore the Chinese sense of time is reflected in its language structure, sentence order as well as logical thinking, which is distinguished from English.

Based on Chinese perspective of time information structuring also follows a similar pattern that is given information represented by premises or topics are positioned in front of new information signified by affirmation of the premises or comments on the topic.

That brings us to the general distinction existed between Chinese and English. Chinese is a language governed by the function it performs, that is, the idea or the message assumes a position of paramount importance. It determines how we organize sentences and represent reality. The so-called analytical/paratactic language is characterized by word order and function words while English, as a synthetic language, is characterized by "SVO" pattern and inflected changes. An English sentence must contain a subject and a predicate. Its expanded parts, whether it is a word or a clause, can be placed either before or after the word modified. English as a hypotactic

language ruled by its structural forms offers much flexibility in organizing sentences as well as structuring information. The synthetic and compact features of English pose distinctive contrast to analytic and diffusive Chinese, thus present difficulties in comprehension.

III. Individual differences versus comprehension

According to Ellis (1996) variables of individual differences that affect second language acquisition constitute beliefs, affective state, age, aptitude, learning style, motivation and personality. I would rather treat individual differences in terms of memory capacity and mode, as well as analysis ability and mode, which are probably related to one's aptitude.

In the course of information processing , what affects the learner's comprehension is how fast he can analyze the input and how well he can memorize it. This has much to do with the way the learner processes information. As we know memory is closely associated with comprehension. The more familiar a topic is to the leaner the more easily it is retained in his mind. Also higher degree of comprehension and memory facilitates analysis and which in turn promotes understanding.

Take listening comprehension as an example. Subjects need to extract meaning from the perceived stimuli through identifying, categorizing and analyzing in order to detect the relationship among sentences and then retain only the propositional content rather than original words in memory. As our memory capacity is limited and research findings show that we can only retain seven word at most each time we are exposed to utterances. But if the learner is apt at condensing messages more than one time that means his memory capacity is enlarged and he can learn more than average learners do. The factors that affect our memory and analysis ability are knowledge of word and knowledge of world. If a learner takes initiative in learning and pay much attention to word power building and knowledge accumulating, he will definitely surpass his peers. So it is with reading comprehension.

IV. Interferences of mother tongue versus production of the target language

The third factor that influence second language acquisition especially in producing the target language derives from the mother tongue. As stated previously Chinese assumes a different point of view toward the world from English and this results in different ways of expression in language. Thus Chinese learners of English are more often that not influenced by their mother tongue when speaking English. They tend to construct English in terms of Chinese structure and this invariably hinders the learner from articulating correct and idiomatic English.

In classroom learning, for instance, subjects are likely to formulate ideas in Chinese on a certain topic before they actually bring them out in English. In other words, the preliminary planning of speech , i.e. the rough outline of speech is accomplished in Chinese. Consequently the learner's utterances are strongly interfered by their mother tongue. Furthermore, if the topic is concerned with the local events the influence becomes even more intensified as the social setting where communications are carried out in Chinese will affect his/her English production. This can be illustrated in grammatical structure, lexical choices and the use of transition words.

The following examples are taken from the compositions intended for English Speaking contest themed as "Tsinghua People and Humanism".

e.g. 1. Tsinghua should try to create all kinds of atmosphere of Chinese, should try its best to develop the departments related to Chinese and should invite famous Chinese

scholars to give us lectures. It can arouse students' interesting to Chinese. If one feel no interested in Chinese, he never learn it well.

The above paragraph demonstrates strong influence of Chinese in the following three respects. Firstly the writer omits "subject" for two times in the first sentence and merge what should be three sentences into one. Secondly it lacks cohesive ties between first two sentences which is typical of Chinese. Thirdly it lacks S-V concord as shown in "If one feel .... he never learn ...." Since the passage is strongly interfered by the student's mother tongue, the idea he wants to convey is not clear as illustrated in the second clause of the first sentence "develop the departments related to Chinese..." The reader doesn't get the message at all therefore the idea is vague.

eg. 2. We are persevering, diligent and good at catching opportunity. We stick to our cause no matter how tough it might be. Strong will, perseverance and diligence are the three essentials of our success. We know that opportunity is something acquired. It is not a luck falling from the heaven. The more we are prepared for it, the more likely we are to get it. On the other hand, if we don't reserve it we will lose it even if it has knocked at our doors. Success and opportunity belong to those who can suffer long years of patient toil and constant efforts. Of course, belong to us.

The obvious mistakes in example 2 lie in inappropriate use of collocations such as in "opportunity is something acquired but not a luck...", "if we don't reserve it..." and "suffer long years of patient toil and constant efforts" etc. Even though the message is clear that the writer thinks opportunity needs to be strived for otherwise it won't fall upon you automatically the style seems rather flowery and there are much verbosity and hyperbole in it, plus incomplete sentences and lack of cohesive ties.

e.g. 3. Tsinghua teachers require students very strictly in study. Before admitted into Tsinghua university I knew some information that the teachers required students very strictly. After I am admitted into Tsinghua university, the understanding is deepened. I may give some examples...

Again, the errors in example 3 are displayed in diction and collocations such as "require students strictly, knew some information" etc.

In the above three sections the author discussed three different elements that affect foreign language learning which comprise cognitive style, language processing mechanism and interferences from mother tongue. Next the paper seeks to explore solutions to the problems.

V. Possible solutions

In this section the author intends to propose some possible solutions to the aforementioned problems which are composed of stimulation of empathy, adjustment of attitudes and learning strategies.

Learning a foreign language is in fact to acquire an entirely new perspective of viewing this world. This is especially true to the Chinese learners of English as there exists large discrepancy between the two languages. In order to succeed the learner should develop a kind of empathy which means the willingness to understand the native speaker's feelings. To achieve this, the learner must read widely about the

culture of the target language including politics, history, economy as well as literature because all those reflect the cognitive paradigm of the target language.. In addition with the aid of mass media the learner can make use of audio-visual equipment, newspaper and magazines to learn contemporary English,. They should pay particular attention to how English speakers express their ideas and how they view this world. Gradually they will form a kind of habit of using the target language in thinking. Although there are influences from the mother tongue, they will get on the path of using English as a communicative tool presently.

Admittedly learning English in a Chinese environment is the most difficult thing to do . Yet it is also surprisingly true that there are fluent English speakers of Chinese nationality around us. The fact that some students and teachers of English, and employees in joint ventures can speak perfect English indicates that apart from cultural environment there are other factors such as interest and motivation that play a role in second language acquisition as pointed out by Gardner (1985). Whether out of integrated or instrumental purposes, if the learner displays great interest in learning English he/she will certainly seize all kinds of opportunities to practice English such as making friends with foreigners, attending lectures given by foreign experts and participating academic meetings or seminars etc.

If the learners' language proficiency is approximately on the same level other factors like attitude will play its role. Learner's attitudes toward language learning can be classified into the following three groups: reluctance, enthusiasm and something in between. Research findings show that enthusiastic learners make greater progress than the other groups. So it is important to help students with low motivation to adjust their attitudes towards learning English. The reasons for those who are reluctant to learn English are as follows. First when the students failed in their initial attempt to learn the language well they lose their confidence and then give up. Second under the pressure of their main subjects the non-English majors could hardly find enough time to improve their English. And lastly some students don't think they have the opportunity either to study or to work abroad, so they consider English as an extra burden.

What the teacher should do to help those with negative attitudes toward learning English is to build up their confidence by selecting appropriate teaching materials and providing sufficient chances to practice in class. Even a tiny progress made by those students should be encouraged. And in this way they are likely to catch up.

Regarding learning strategies, we should direct our attention to the language itself in terms of organization of ideas, sentence structure, and cohesive devices, which are regarded as the weak points of Chinese learners. The Chinese learners of English should always be kept in mind about the major differences between Chinese and English so that they could organize their idea in a manner of English speakers, that is, always follow the sentence pattern of "SVO", present a topic sentence in a passage, and remember to place conjunctions or transitions when necessary in order to bring coherence. When students become sensitive to using those devices they will be in a better position to command the language.

VI. Conclusion

In order to solve the problems encountered by Chinese learners of English they should be trained to acquire an entirely different pattern of cognition, i.e. to think in the manner as the native speakers do. They should also be taught to organize sentences and select words in a way that is acceptable to the native speakers. They should also learn to use transition words to bring a passage a coherent whole. To achieve these-the

learner should be motivated to master English as a communicative tool and to cultivate a positive attitude toward learning English.

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